

BATTLE OF PILOT KNOB

Fort Davidson State Historic Site



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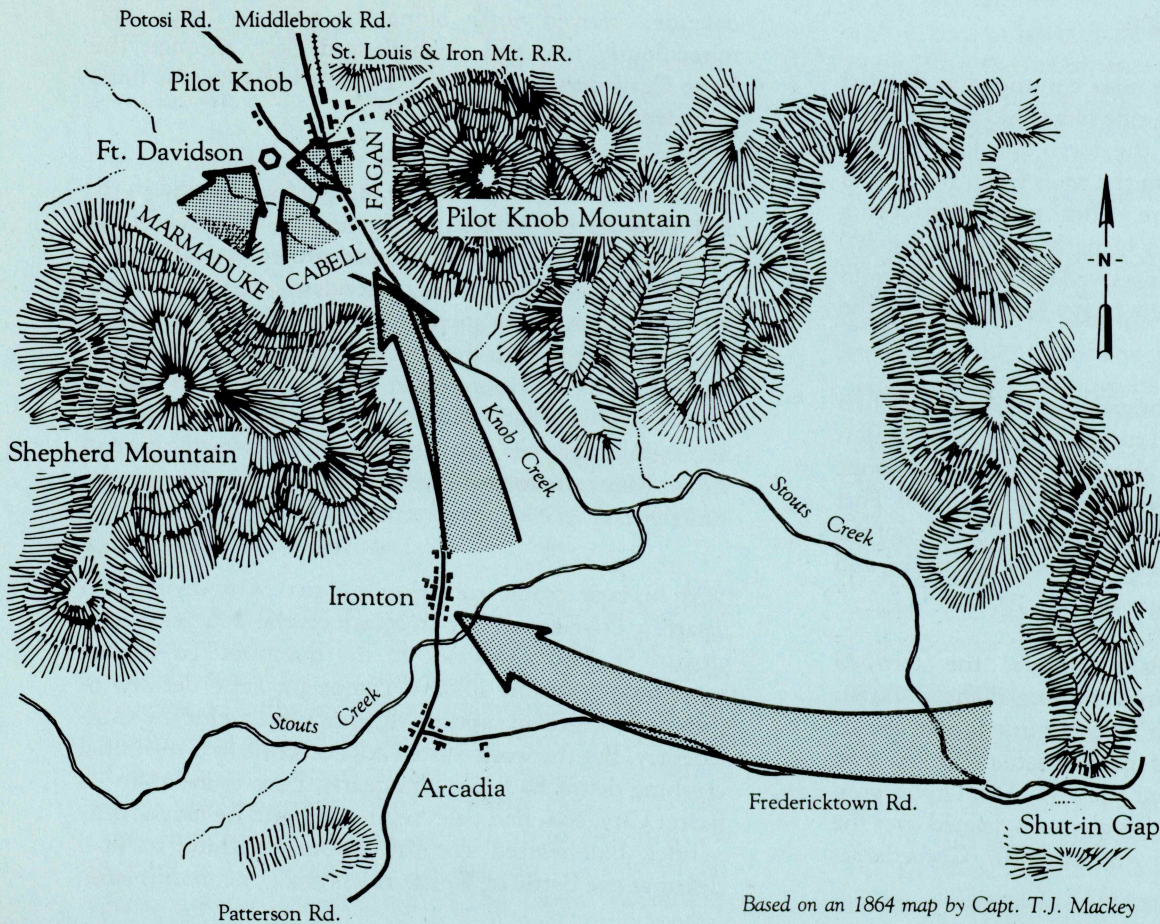


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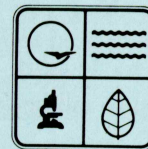
Pilot Knob, Missouri

September 26 and 27, 1864



Battle of Pilot Knob

Fort Davidson
State Historic Site



MISSOURI DEPARTMENT
OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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Historic Preservation
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Battle of Pilot Knob

The state of Missouri withstood more than a thousand clashes during the great Civil War. Only two other states, Virginia and Tennessee, had to endure more. On the afternoon of September 27, 1864, the peaceful, picturesque Arcadia Valley of southeast Missouri was witness to one of the bloodiest battles of the entire war. In a brief span of 20 minutes, more than 1,000 officers and men lay wounded and dying at the foot of Pilot Knob Mountain.

The Desperate Summer

By the summer of 1864, the fiery campaign of the Confederate States of America was on the verge of being snuffed out. East of the Mississippi River, General Ulysses S. Grant's Federal army had the southern army of General Robert E. Lee under siege and pinned down in Virginia. Another Union force under General William Tecumseh Sherman had sidestepped the Confederacy's tough western army and was marching through Georgia to threaten Atlanta.

West of the Mississippi, in the Confederacy's Trans-Mississippi Department, Commanding General Edmund Kirby Smith was behaving like the ruler of an empire separate and independent of the rest of the Confederate States. Smith held his prize infantry on a tight rein, using them only to secure the borders of his sprawling domain. The lack of a Confederate military threat in the west allowed the Union to lightly garrison its western flank and to concentrate its strength in the east.

In July of 1864, Kirby Smith received orders to send his best infantry units east for the relief of Georgia and Alabama. Fearful of losing command of his infantry, Smith notified President Jefferson Davis that he was making plans for a major western campaign, which would be stymied by the loss of his infantry. By August, Davis deferred to Smith, and not a single rifleman was ever sent across the Mississippi to the aid of Atlanta. The threatened loss of his infantry forced Smith to hastily arrange a raid into Arkansas and Missouri.

Smith chose Major General Sterling Price, a former governor of Missouri, to lead the western campaign. From the outset, however, it was clear that Smith did not intend to gamble many of his organized troops on such an ambitious venture.

The Ragged Assembly

The expedition was to consist of three mounted divisions, each named after its commanding general. The first division was to be led by James Fagan, an Arkansas politician with a meager military background; the second was to be headed by John Marmaduke, a West Point graduate; and the third by Joe Shelby, a brilliant and tough cavalry officer. The three divisions were to move through northeast Arkansas to the Missouri border, where they would split into three columns and advance 20 miles apart on a quick dash into St. Louis.



Both Fagan's and Marmaduke's divisions were severely undermanned. On his way north through Arkansas, Shelby was ordered to round up as many deserters as possible from behind the Union lines. Shelby rejoined Price's army near the Missouri border, bringing with him more than 3,000 deserters at gun point to serve in the great campaign. Deserters eventually were to make up nearly a third of Price's force.

Price's entourage was a ragged lot to say the least. Most of the troops were clothed in tattered rags and several thousand were barefoot. Most had no canteens, cartridge boxes or other military issue; instead they carried water in jugs and stuffed cartridges inside their shirts and pockets. Tents and blankets were absent. Arms consisted of an endless variety and caliber of rifles and muskets, making ammunition supply in the field nearly impossible. By the time Price reached Missouri, nearly a fourth of his Army still were without arms.

On September 19, 1864, Price was ready. With a 12,000-man mounted army of military men and misfits, regulars and ragamuffins, Price crossed the Arkansas border into Missouri.

The Fateful March

Price's advance into Missouri was made by three columns spaced 10 to 20 miles apart. By September 24, two of the columns had converged on Fredericktown to prepare for a thrust into St. Louis. Marmaduke joined Price two days later after traveling a longer route.

Meanwhile, in St. Louis, General William Rosecrans, commander of the Department of Missouri, was getting desperate. Early in September, Rosecrans had received reports that Price was advancing toward Missouri with a major force. Constant appeals for reinforcements brought only a handful of infantry to defend the city. By late September, a small garrison of 6,000 men was all that stood between the greatest city west of the Mississippi and Price's invading horde.

In Fredericktown, Price and his three division commanders debated whether to assault a Federal entrenchment at Pilot Knob on the way to St. Louis. Having met only token resistance thus far, Shelby wanted to move directly to St. Louis, which he believed could be taken in a day. The others felt it would be a tactical mistake to leave an armed Federal garrison unmolested to the rear as the Confederate column moved northward.

On September 26, the die was cast. Shelby was ordered to move northwest to Irondale and destroy the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railroad. The rest of Price's army was to prepare for battle. Without waiting for Marmaduke's entire division to reach Fredericktown, Price ordered Fagan to march north to assault the Federal garrison at Pilot Knob.

It was not until the night of September 24 that the Union's General Rosecrans was informed Price's force had crossed into Missouri. As Pilot Knob was his only fortification in south central Missouri, Rosecrans sent St. Louis district commandant General Thomas Ewing and a detachment of the 14th Iowa infantry to the area by train. By noon of September 26, Ewing had reached the hexagonal earthworks known as Fort Davidson.

The fort lay on the floor of a valley surrounded on three sides by commanding hills. It was situated so that enemy infantry would have to cross hundreds of yards in the open to reach its formidable walls. The fort, however, would be vulnerable to any artillery which could be placed on top of the encircling hills. Ewing had about 1,000 men with which to defend the position.

On the afternoon of September 26, Ewing sent two companies of infantry through Ironton to patrol the road leading to Fredericktown. No sooner had they reached the "Shut-Ins" gap outside Ironton than they ran head-on into Fagan's advance brigades.

Fagan's Arkansas troops quickly drove the Union patrol back into Ironton, where brisk rifle and cannon fire left scars which still can be seen today on the Iron County Courthouse. Ewing immediately reinforced his patrol with a detachment of the 14th Iowa, two pieces of artillery, and all the cavalry he could muster. The accurate, punishing volleys of the veteran 14th Iowa sent Fagan's untested troops into a near panic, forcing them to retreat to the Shut-Ins gap. Repeated attacks by the Confederate advance, however, slowly pushed the Union skirmishers

back into Ironton, where nightfall and a heavy rainstorm brought the engagement to an end.

At dawn of September 27, Fagan's dismounted cavalry, now reinforced by Marmaduke's, hurled themselves at the Union line fronting on the courthouse, forcing a withdrawal to the gap between Pilot Knob and Shepherd mountains. When the small Union force came within sight of the fort, Ewing ordered the 14th Iowa to a spur of Shepherd Mountain and his dismounted cavalry to the side of Pilot Knob, opening the gap to the Federal artillery in the fort. Heavy skirmishing in the gap resulted in numerous Confederate losses without appreciable gain. Eventually, the desperate Union patrol was overwhelmed and forced to shoot its way back to rifle pits which extended from the walls of the fort.

The Silence

Fagan's and Marmaduke's divisions, which already had suffered more than 200 casualties in the first evening and morning of fighting, now swarmed over the encircling hills and into the Ironton gap. Ewing found himself completely bottled up in the fort with no avenue of escape. At a meeting in the gap, Price determined that his big guns would be placed on the top of Shepherd Mountain. He then sent an emissary, Colonel Lauchlan Maclean, to the fort to ask for a Union surrender.

The hot-headed Maclean, a veteran of the Kansas border war, was a personal enemy of Ewing. When the Union general refused to surrender, Maclean returned to Price and urged a frontal assault on the fort, claiming that there was no time to bring up all of the Confederate artillery and place it on the mountain. Price soon became convinced that placing the big guns on the mountain would be no easy task when the first attempt at placement saw a Confederate cannon disabled and its gunners killed by the first few volleys from the expert Federal artillerymen.

Price now was determined to try a frontal assault. For nearly an hour, a hush fell over the peaceful valley - the silence before the storm. Among the heavy brush and timber on the mountains, the Confederate commanders were forming their brigades for battle. In the fort, Ewing ordered his cannons run down from maximum elevation and trained across the flat. Their load was to be canister rounds, each filled with hundreds of half-inch lead balls. Because not all of the riflemen could take their places to fire from the walls, details were assembled to tear cartridges, load rounds, and pass up guns as they were needed. At the foot of the encircling mountains, 9,000 Confederates crouched down and waited.

The Storm

At two o'clock the silence was broken. Confederate cannons in the gap opened on the earthen fort. Soon waves of dismounted southern cavalry poured into the open. The troops, formed in long columns three ranks deep, slowly moved toward the fort. Inside the walled enclosure, the riflemen were ordered to hold their fire and the Union ar-



tillery was opened on the advancing Confederate lines. At short range across the flat, the big guns could not miss. Dense clouds of smoke soon blanketed the fort and rose in a column hundreds of feet high.

The surrounding Confederate mass continued its ill-fated advance. Now aware that the rifle pits could not be held, Union soldiers poured into the fort. The Confederate horde was only 500 yards from the walls when the Union riflemen were ordered to fire. With spent rifles being passed down and loaded ones being handed up, the 300 rifles along the top of the walls spewed forth lead as if from machine guns. Smoke from the heavy fire obliterated the Confederate lines.

At 200 yards, the southern brigades unleashed their first volley and broke into a crazed running charge. The Union gunners could see only the churning legs as the smoke blocked everything else from view. The walls of Fort Davidson now blazed as fire leaped from the muzzles of the gun barrels. At 30 yards, Price's troops finally broke and slowly started to fall back.

Spurred on by their gallant officers, the terrified southerners re-formed their lines and surged ahead. Again they hesitated and again their officers turned them about. This third charge saw some of the men actually charge into a dry moat which surrounded the fort. The Union gunners, with artillery shells fused as grenades, leaned over the walls and tossed them on the huddled Confederate soldiers.

The blood and confusion now was too much to bear. Just a few yards from the fort, Price's soldiers finally turned and ran. As the soldiers streamed away from the fort and the smoke had a chance to clear, the incredible carnage became apparent. For 500 yards on the three sides of the fort that were attacked, the ground was covered with dead and wounded men. In the short few minutes that had just passed, one of the bloodiest clashes of the Civil War had taken place.

The Great Escape

The black rainy night which settled in the Arcadia Valley saw every shelter in Ironton filled with Confederate wounded. Price sent messengers north toward the Union lines to beg for medical assistance. His entire command lay in a pitiful state of confusion. Most companies were scattered and only a few posted sentries or maintained any semblance of military discipline.

Inside Fort Davidson, General Ewing was deciding on his next move. He correctly surmised that the new morning would dawn with Price's artillery perched on top of Shepherd Mountain, rendering the fort untenable. Near midnight, Ewing hit upon a daring plan; he would attempt to slip his troops out of the fort and through the Confederate lines.

At midnight, Ewing muffled the wheels of the six field guns and, with the 14th Iowa at the head, marched the column silently out of the fort. The weary Union defenders moved north along the road to Potosi and miraculously marched unchallenged right through the loose Confederate lines. In a few hours, Ewing was miles away from the fort.

At two o'clock in the morning, a squad left behind in the fort blew up the powder magazine in the center of the earthen enclosure. Confederates roused by the blast thought the explosion was an accident. At dawn, Price's dwindling army awakened to find the fort empty, with a giant smoking hole in the center. In a fit of rage, Price sent Marmaduke's division after the escaping Federals. Although Ewing ran headlong into Shelby, he was able to successfully fight his way to a strong Union fortification in Rolla. Marmaduke and Shelby wasted three days on the futile pursuit.

With his best assault troops lost and two of his divisions in disarray, Price knew that an attack on the now reinforced city of St. Louis was out of the question. To salvage something from the ill-fated campaign, Price decided to turn northwest and capture Missouri's capital for the Confederacy. But the week wasted at Pilot Knob and the initial crushing defeat had cost him dearly. Price found that Jefferson City, too, had been reinforced, and he fought only a brief, half-hearted skirmish before marching to final defeat at the Battle of Westport less than one month later.